

Initial Assessment

James City County Police Department

**Police Chief
& Command Leadership**

Assessment Period: October 10 -24, 2022

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Overview:

The Objective of this report is to offer James City County feedback and recommendations in response to the recent Climate Survey at the James City County Police Department. This report will focus on the Police Chief and Command Staff located at the Law Enforcement Center, 4600 Opportunity Way, Williamsburg, VA, 23188.

Definition:

The use of the term “Department” will refer to the entire JCCPD and not to specific units. The term “leadership” will refer directly to the Chief of Police and Command Staff at the Assistant Chief of Police rank and will not be in reference to Lieutenant and Sergeant levels.

Method & Scope:

The method used in this assessment is one-to-one conversation with 18 individuals in leadership positions within the Department. The scope of the assessment was to determine both the areas of strength and weakness as well as opportunities for immediate and long-term improvement. Conversations focused on four key questions:

1. How are things going in department prior to and after the Climate Survey?
2. What strengths and weaknesses do you identify in current leadership?
3. What solutions do you suggest (easy wins and long-term opportunities)?
4. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?

Observation:

Interviews overwhelmingly confirmed morale and trust in the Chief of Police and Command Staff leadership is at an unprecedented low. It is worth noting, however, satisfaction and trust with immediate supervisors is correspondingly high. When asked why this was the case, Lieutenant and Sergeant level leadership indicated that they remained in close contact, connected, and in daily communication with their respective units. Correspondingly, the Chief of Police and Assistant Chief of Police ranks are perceived as disconnected, out of touch, and in poor communication.

Chief of Police Eric Peterson shared his commitment to developing staff and creating opportunity for advancement within the department. When asked for his leadership vision, he supplied a copy of his *Leadership Intent, Core Values & Expectations* [remarks below are in summary for the purpose of assessment – a full text is available directly from Chief Peterson].

Chief Peterson intends to provide strong management, energetic leadership, and to employ exceptional communication. His goal is to provide an environment of teamwork and professionalism, in a culture of respect and community engagement. His core values in leadership are:

- Integrity - defined as acting with honesty, confidentiality, respect, moral strength, honor, impartiality, inspiring confidence, and acting with ethical and fair treatment.
- Leadership – defined as guiding, trusting, and empowering employees. He seeks to identify future leaders, be approachable, consistent, and inspiring, recognizing and rewarding employees for outstanding service.
- Community Involvement – defined as partnership and fair treatment.
- Professionalism – defined as high personal standards, ensuring pride in appearance and conduct for all employees, as well as open, honest, consistent and transparent communication and action.
- Respect – defined as acceptance of diversity, listening, patience, valuing opinions of others, appreciation and acknowledgement of difference, and promotion of an unbiased environment.

Chief Peterson expressed his concern regarding negative perceptions presently debilitating the Department. He is aware of the discontent with recent promotions and perceptions of racism and gender bias but maintains these moves were appropriate, transparent, and inline with values noted above. Chief Peterson is committed to advancing the candidate that is best suited for the diversified team he seeks to build under his tenure. Nonetheless, the result of such promotions and the restructuring of the senior leadership at the Assistant Chief of Police level has created conflict and distrust among staff. To address the underlying issues, common themes emerging from interviews are grouped into five sections to guide immediate and long-term solutions.

Summary of Themes:

The purpose of the following summary is to identify strengths and weaknesses, perceived or factual, upon which actionable items and constructive recommendations can be developed. The themes noted below were present in every interview. Collectively, they emerge as a set of key performance indicators, against which, steps can be taken and measured to mitigate or continue to develop successful leadership.

- **National Environment of Policing, Recruitment & Retention (Vacancies):**

The national environment of distrust in policing (media/social media) impacts the Department's ability to attract new recruits and fill vacancies. The Department is hemorrhaging personnel. Currently, there are approximately 14-16 vacancies and several pending transitions anticipated. Vacancies in the Department have created a situation where existing staff are experiencing significantly increased workloads. In several cases, individuals have been "pulled" from their units to ensure adequate coverage staff patrol shifts. [Note: Vacancies in the Community Service Unit, School Resource Unit, Traffic Unit, Animal Control Unit, and Investigations Unit]. Further, the national environment of distrust in policing contributes to a sense of depletion in morale among officers, particularly when there is a perception that the Chief of Police and/or the County Administrator(s) are not backing them up with concrete support and regular acknowledgement (e.g., The failure to name an Officer of the Year).

Key Performance Indicator(s): Set annual measure for successful recruitment & retention and communicate progress toward goals biannually; reinstate and/or establish regular acknowledgement opportunities.

- **Compensation & Recognition:**

Pay is a measure of respect for the work of the Department. Individuals noted that recent pay raises by the County have begun to address this significant concern. However, they also note that compensation, benchmarked against peer departments, does not inspire recruitment and retention. Consecutively, the direct impact of late raises, lack of transparency (particularly on the use of government pandemic relief funds), and concern for forward pay equity contribute to increasingly low morale. The most recent pay raises are perceived as late and, in effect, borrowing from the future to pay the present. Similarly, there is a concern that those at the Assistant Chief of Police level received title changes with related pay raises, including recent % raises, without expectation of additional responsibility. There is a growing level of distrust among the lower ranks regarding fairness and equity in both pay and job assignment.

Key Performance Indicator(s): Annually benchmark compensation goals and communicate steps to achieve progress; provide evidence of fairness & equity in promotion process.

- **Communication & Confidentiality:**

Several noted that the Chief of Police and in many cases the three Assistant Chief of Police do not regularly attend meetings where officers are in attendance as a group (e.g., Day, Evening, and Midnight Roll Call). Roll Call is considered a missed opportunity for both formal and informal communication. *[It is important to note here Roll Call was limited during the pandemic]*. Similarly, walking through the building regularly, being present with officers, and understanding the daily details of each shift are considered missed opportunities to build necessary relationships for effective leadership. There is a lack of confidence in leadership's ability to communicate in a timely, appropriate, factual, and confidential manner. The "rumor" mill is destructive when not met with regular factual updates from leadership.

Key Performance Indicator(s): Communicate intent to engage and account for regular attendance by the Chief of Police and Command Staff at scheduled meetings and/or regular ride along opportunities with lower ranking staff.

- **Leadership & Trust:**

Leadership begins with the Chief of Police, his vision, his values, and the commitment to development of a team environment. Officers need to feel their leadership "fights for them" and "stands beside them" – the quote used often was the Chief and Command Staff need to be "an Officer's officer." There is a perceived lack of leadership in the direction of the Department, process for solving issues, and trust in Command Staff's ability to lead the day-to-day concerns of the Department. If someone speaks out, there is a fear of retaliation manifested in perception of who receives promotions, unfair assignments, and efforts to avoid interaction/conversation. Further, there is a perception that policy is changed to promote favorites into positions of authority without transparent and fair processes. These perceptions must be addressed for the Department to move forward as a team.

Key Performance Indicator(s): Establish a process for collaborative development, dissemination, and updates of the Department's Vision and Annual Leadership Plan; and complete policy revisions with direct input from unit leadership deploying a clear communication process prior to activating new policy.

- **Communication & Relationship:**

Staff need to feel comfortable speaking with their Chief of Police and Command Staff. Communication via email is not the same as an investment in personal relationships and face-to-face interaction. There is a broad sentiment that leadership should give an opportunity for staff to voice ideas with the confidence they will be heard, respected, and genuinely considered. The Officer Advisory Council is considered a good start. However, there is a growing sense this group is heard but not taken seriously – sentiments such as “dismissive” and “not addressing the issues” were stated several times. Leadership should capitalize on “low hanging fruit” to demonstrate appreciation and value for employees. (For example: Field Training Officer Lapel Pins, Load Bearing Vests, Patrol Schedule Changes, Mental Health Professional On-Site, etc.).

Key Indicator(s): Develop a collaborative model for communication focused on relationship building, receiving and vetting staff solutions, and creating accountable time-sensitive action plans to be updated monthly.

Additional Overall Observations:

Issues raised throughout these conversations include an overarching discontentment with top leadership noting the lack of strong visionary, collaborative, and inspiring direction. The perception of a significant lack of communication has led to a sense of avoidance of employees, limited to friendships, poor to no communication, favoritism, and retaliation. This perception has permeated the department to such an extent that individuals are electing to leave creating a potential crisis in staffing.

Further, when asked about the perception of racism and gender bias, several indicated they did not experience racism or gender bias regularly in the Department. Rather, the perception of favoritism in promotions, corresponding salary raises, and job assignments has led to a strong sense of bias on the part of the Chief, Command Staff leadership, and potentially County level leadership.

Finally, several of those interviewed indicated their frustration with the number of “assessors” and “coaches” employed by the County with the concern this will not result in necessary change for the success of the Department. Several indicated the County is failing to validate the level of concern in staffing for the safety of officers as well as the unique, vital, and risk laden role of the JCCPD in compensation decisions.

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Recommendations Based on Key Performance Indicators:

1. **Set an annual measure for successful recruitment & retention and communicate progress toward goals biannually; also reinstate and/or establish regular acknowledgement opportunities.**
 - a. Set a numeric recruitment goal and measure progress against this goal. Reporting the goal to the entire Department and being accountable for progress.
 - b. Schedule and complete direct conversation with employees that have indicated their desire to leave. Discover what it would take to keep them on staff. Discuss with them viable options and express their value as a member of the Department.
 - c. Value experience and sacrifice of staff and engage them in problem solving. Let them know they are trusted and respect their input. Visibly utilize appropriate suggestions giving credit publicly where positive outcomes are realized.
 - d. Consider addressing the outcome of the Climate Survey and steps taken to retain talented employees via video message and small group discussion meetings – potentially using outside facilitators.
2. **Annually benchmark compensation goals and communicate steps to achieve progress; and provide evidence of fairness & equity in promotion process.**
 - a. Review promotion policy annually and communicate expected changes well in advance for higher ranking vacancies. Fairness requires advance criteria for promotions that are well documented and accepted prior to the opening of a search process.
 - b. Develop a public review of compensation benchmarks and goals and keep these goals in front of the Department as you make measurable progress (advocate for the Department in partnership with the County).
 - c. Engage systematic reviews to avoid and rectify salary compression when hiring new recruits at higher pay levels as compared to long tenured officers. Salary compression should be addressed with each hire and within each unit.
3. **Communicate intent to directly engage staff - accounting for regular attendance by Chief of Police and Command Staff at scheduled meetings and/or regular ride along opportunities with lower ranking staff.**
 - a. Systematically increase Chief of Police visibility by rerouting through the entire office at each shift change, arrival, and departure engaging in conversation with employees as opportunities present.
 - b. Reassure employees they can speak with the Chief of Police and Command Staff directly without fear of retaliation. Then, ensure there is not unconscious bias and retaliation in job assignments and promotion opportunities. Consider outside trainers for the Department regarding conscious and unconscious bias, repeated annually.
 - c. Re-establish the organizational priority of the Roll Call for team development and as an active channel for communication with senior leadership. Account for the Chief of Police and Command Staff in attendance on a regular basis to field questions and directly communicate information. Refrain from using the statement “We are working on it.”

Give relevant and reasonable facts to develop trust while avoiding promises that cannot be confirmed.

4. **Establish a process for collaborative development, dissemination, and updates of the Department's Vision and Annual Leadership Plan; and complete policy revisions with direct input from unit leadership deploying a clear communication process prior to activating new policy.**
 - a. The Chief of Police must articulate and share his vision widely with the Department. This should be developed with Command Staff and refined with each layer of the chain of command until a collaborative and unifying mission, vision, goals, and objectives are identified and codified. This should include a shared definition of leadership to which all persons in leadership are held accountable and reviewed annually.
 - b. Engage a department wide strategic planning process using a third-party. Use this opportunity to develop a collaborative leadership vision and annual operational plan.
 - c. Consider establishing a policy review commission made up of a cross section of staff with the mandate to review suggested changes, compliance, identify "flag" concerns, and make formal recommendations to the Chief of Police and Command Staff.

5. **Develop a collaborative model for communication focused on relationship building, receiving and vetting staff solutions, and creating accountable time-sensitive action plans to be updated monthly.**
 - a. Acknowledge excellence among leadership and develop healthy relationships at a face-to-face level with each of the Lieutenants and Sergeants.
 - b. Continue to develop the Officers Advisory Council and do not cancel or postpone meetings. This sends the message the OAC is not valued. Use this platform to create detailed action plans with discrete deadlines. Report the actions as "good news" and "progress" at regular update opportunities such as Roll Call and use the existing Newsletter for brief updates.
 - c. Consider additional "low hanging fruit" wins with each Assistant Chief of Police and their direct reports at the Lieutenant and Sergeant levels. Demonstrate value for employees by supporting supervisors in their request for gear, ideas for solutions. Develop processes for acknowledgement and appreciation.
 - d. Show employees leadership knows and cares about their work by being present, technically up-to-date, and available to back them up as needed.
 - e. Refrain from statements that devalue such as, "If you do not like it, you can leave."
 - f. Ensure exit interviews with departing staff. Make this a priority to demonstrate respect for work to date and appreciation for their feedback for improvement in the future.

Final Considerations:

Key Performance Indicators are measurable opportunities to demonstrate willingness to change, to show a commitment to developing a positive work environment, and to demonstrate dedication to equity and fairness. Leadership will need to employ both intellectual and emotional intelligence when leading people. Many of the suggestions above are behavioral changes which are visually verifiable. Trust, in this case, cannot be “coached” but can be earned. The role of the Executive Coach going forward should be to remind the Chief of Police and Command Staff what they already know – *“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing”* (Peter Drucker). The issue at hand with the JCCPD is the redevelopment of trust by doing the right thing - actively demonstrating care for employee well-being, genuine relationship building across the Department, respect for experience, humility to learn from staff expertise employing their reasonable solutions, transparency in process and communication, and setting collaborative strong vision to inspire employees to perform at their best.

Conclusion:

James City County employed several individuals to assess, shadow, observe, and coach leadership. Going forward, I recommend a single coach who would begin now and become a well-known as a trusted entity in the Department; someone who is frequently on-site to meet with and develop a relationship with the Chief of Police and Command Staff (available to Lieutenants and Sergeants as needed). The Executive Coach should be on retainer with the Department for not less than one year. Substantive, effective, and lasting change will take time if this leadership team is to surmount the current negative environment, retain and recruit talent, and lead a successful team in a healthy work environment going forward. During this year, the Executive Coach should meet regularly with leadership in individual and group coaching sessions, offer monthly “temperature checks” or “pulse surveys” to measure effective change, and work directly with a third-party strategic planning partner to make certain communication is robust, transformative, and originating with the Chief of Police. Current issues within the Police Department are not insurmountable but will require immediate and visible change as well as a growing trust that these changes are not temporary.

Once again, please accept profound appreciation for the work of the James City County Police Department and the James City County Administration. This will conclude my work with the JCCPD until otherwise engaged. Please do hesitate to contact me should you require further information.